

## 14. STRAY BIRD NOTES FROM MALABAR

1. THE STORK-BILLED KINGFISHER. This bird though reputed shy, is a conspicuous resident in many villages in Palghat taluk. Even in the heart of the town its calls are often heard during the rainy season. In the drier months of the year it goes about singly and is somewhat retiring by disposition, but when the rains break, it is found in pairs and flies about boldly filling the air with its loud raucous calls.

In the months of May, June, July and August, the Storkbilled Kingfisher indulges in a strange sort of game. Both birds of a pair sit on some low perch, a short distance away from a mud or brick wall that has neither been plastered nor whitewashed, and uttering the harshest of their calls, dart with breath-taking speed at the small holes or cracks in the wall as if to transfix the wall with their bills. Some times they hit it with such force that an onlooker would expect their bills to break. Yet nothing happens, the birds return to the perch, flick their tails and bob up and down (as the Common Kingfisher does after it has swallowed a fish) and once again without waiting even to wipe off the mud sticking to their bills, fling themselves at the wall, to the accompaniment of fiendish croaks.

One of the walls, on which a pair used to concentrate, had a long narrow crack running down it. In five different places along this the Kingfishers had made small cavities 3 to 4 inches across and 4 or 5 inches deep by flying repeatedly to the same points. None of the holes was excavated further and, after a time, the birds lost all interest in them.

The zeal with which the birds play this 'game' decreases as the rainy season advances; in May and June the kingfishers spend five to six hours at it, whereas, in late August, they fly only once or twice a day at the walls. By the end of July the birds begin to go about singly. It is clear that they take the greatest interest in the walls when they are together, and become indifferent when, or soon after, the pairs break up.

The birds do not seem to have any obvious motive for doing this. Though geckos and some insects like the mole-cricket often hide in the crevices, the kingfishers have never been found catching and eating any.

The White-breasted Kingfisher, while making a tunnel, often does the same sort of thing in a mud bank. But the Storkbill cannot nest in hard, three-foot thick brick walls. As the birds make these small holes year after year, unless we assume that they never learn from experience, we cannot say that they are attempting to nest in the walls.

Is this then a sort of courtship? Or is it just a game the birds play with the sole purpose of letting off steam during the early part of the breeding season? (Though I have yet to find a nest of the Storkbill, I have little doubt that their breeding season here is in the monsoon months.) The Common Kingfisher's courtship consists of, or at least begins with, a mad chase during which the pursuing partner utters high-pitched, piercing whistles. In May and June, the Storkbilled Kingfisher also frequently chases its mate, less speedily than its smaller cousin, but with much more noise. And as it is at this period that the

birds spend most time near the walls, I suspect that this wall-boring may be a part of the courtship activities.

2. THE PARIAH KITE—Local Migration? From the village of Kavasseri, 12 to 13 miles south-west of Palghat, Pariah Kites totally disappear during the monsoon months, though in Palghat town itself they may be seen even at the peak of the monsoon.

On 29th May, 1950, some days after the rains had set in, I was surprised to find some twelve Pariah Kites sailing and soaring like vultures from south to north (or north-east), late in the evening, along a range of hillocks. The next evening not even a single Pariah Kite was seen in the place though I kept close watch. On the 31st, at about 8.30 a.m., I was standing on top of a hillock, one of a line extending roughly east to west for some miles, stretching upto the Palghat Gap on its southern side. There was a strong wind blowing from west to east and a light shower of rain also. My attention was caught by seven Pariah Kites that seemed to be sailing single file against the wind, towards a point in the west. These were very soon followed by a surprising number of Pariah Kites, flying along the same route, over some valleys and low hillocks which lay in a line, east to west. In twenty minutes more than two hundred birds flew past. Some alighted on a low gravel covered hillock, the only low hill which was not all rock. There were many small boulders on this hillock. On these many of the birds sat, some alighted on the bare ground and others waddled about clumsily holding their wings horizontally extended. Often two or three quarrelled for the same stone to perch upon.

Apparently they alighted on the hillock for a brief rest. As some of these took off and continued their journey, others, coming from the east, took their places. Almost all the birds sailed down on steady wings and only two or three strayed, soaring about over some spot on the way. The birds never uttered any calls. By about 9.30 a.m. all the birds had disappeared, though a few still dribbled in in ones and twos. Two or three left the main line of flight and were seen at 10 a.m. wheeling about over a village half a mile to the north. On June 2nd I went at 8.30 a.m. to the same hillock, but not a single Pariah Kite was seen though I remained till 10 a.m. Thirteen or fourteen Brahminy Kites flew west along the same route which the Pariah Kites had taken. The village of Kavasseri lies in a sort of cup within the hills: on the eastern side we have the Palghat Gap, and on the western side there is a small break, a valley, east of Trichur. The Kites seemed to be headed straight towards this. I wonder whether this was a local migration. Normally Pariah Kites are never seen in such large numbers in the place at any time of the year.

3. THE LITTLE MINIVET. THREE ADULTS WORKING AT THE SAME NEST. On the 9th of April, 1950, I came across a nest of the Little Minivet in a teak jungle on the lower slope of a hillock. While watching the birds at work, I was surprised to find *three* birds sharing the labour! One was a male and the other two, apparently, were females. All three came repeatedly to the nest and evinced considerable interest in its progress. One after the other they came to the

nest, their wings feverishly quivering, added some material to the nest, and waited until the others had also done the same. Of the two which were in female plumage, one was definitely more active, came to the nest more often and more regularly and seemed to get more attention from the male. The less active female, however, brought lichen or cobweb now and then and worked it in as efficiently as the other two. About a month later<sup>1</sup> when the two chicks were being fed, all three adult birds were in attendance and all fed the chicks! How did three birds come to share a nest? Was the third another female—one that had not begun to lay, or having laid, had lost its eggs at a late stage,—or a chick of a previous brood? Has this kind of thing been observed in the minivets or any other birds before?

GOVT. VICTORIA COLLEGE,  
PALGHAT, S. MALABAR,  
6th September, 1950.

K. K. NEELAKANTAN,  
B.A. (Hons.)

#### 15. STRAY BIRD NOTES FROM TIBET

In a letter dated 12 April 1950 from Lhasa, Mr. H. R. Richardson of the Indian Political Mission gives some interesting ornithological information.

'The spring always brings a pair of Goshawks (*Astur gentilis*). There are also the Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*), Sparrow-Hawk (*Accipiter nisus*), Cherrug and Laggar Falcons (*F. cherrug* and *F. jugger*) and the Peregrine (*F. peregrinus*), although not actually at Lhasa.

I have seen Avocets (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) in large numbers, also Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) and a Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) on the Hram Tsho.

This year I saw a Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) at about 13,600 feet in November sitting quite happily on a block of ice above Samada. Another point, on which Ludlow<sup>2</sup> had doubts is the occurrence of the White-capped Redstart (*Chaimarrhornis leucocephalus*) beyond the Tang La. It is common round Lhasa in the summer and I have seen it in Yarlung and also some 60 miles north of Lhasa. The Blue-fronted Redstart (*Phoenicurus frontalis*) also occurs round Lhasa.

Once and once only, I have seen a Rosy Pastor (*Pastor roseus*) at Lhasa; it must have been a wanderer<sup>3</sup>.

114, APOLLO STREET,  
FORT, BOMBAY.  
20th May, 1950.

EDITORS

<sup>1</sup> During this interval I was away from the village and could not continue my observations.

<sup>2</sup> Birds of the Gyantse Neighbourhood. *Ibis* (1928:60).